

Ernest Boyer's "Scholarship of Engagement" in Retrospect

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The key phrase in Boyer's (1996) essay is "to serve the larger purpose" (p. 13). That Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) would choose this phrase as the title of their recent book tracing the progress of "engagement for democracy and the transformation of higher education" is an indication of the pivotal influence of this essay in the rise of a movement to renew the press for democratic engagement in American colleges and universities.

Ernest Boyer himself regarded the scholarship of engagement as of central importance in his life's work. This is clearly evident in the choice of this topic as the theme for his address at the induction ceremony at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences when he was honored in Cambridge, Massachusetts on October 11, 1995, shortly before his passing. That someone with Ernie's breadth of experience in both the nation's government and key positions across higher education should deliver such an address gives the call for engaged scholarship special authority and power.

Boyer opened his essay with a celebratory review of the earlier history of the scholarship of engagement. Of central importance in this rhetorical litany of presidential declarations and policy support is the case he makes for the fundamental relationship of education and democracy in the American experience. As someone who has sat through dozens of his speeches, I can testify that this is Ernest Boyer at his best. Not only is this part of his essay an oratorical tour de force, but his statement about the vital role of education in support of a resilient democracy was particularly propitious as we stood on the threshold of the 21st century. I regret that the essay did not appear in the Sunday *New York Times*, above the fold—one of Ernie's goals. Timing was also a strength in Ernest Boyer's leadership. He was right about the deterioration of the critical link between education and democracy. His warning that in this country higher education is increasingly being seen as "part of the problem rather than the solution" and has become a "private benefit, not a public good" (p. 14) could not have been more predictive. Also, no one has done more to focus on the importance of the holistic, integrative thrust of American higher education, so critical at a time when the undergraduate experience was only

beginning to become more vocational—narrowly technical—and first-job oriented. Boyer's firm commitment to education of the whole person and the “larger purposes of American society” (*p. 11*) has never been more urgently needed than in the years since the publication of his essay.

Boyer closed “The Scholarship of Engagement” by again being remarkably prescient. He identified two issues that must be vigorously engaged in the years ahead: the “tragic plight of children” (*p. 17*) and the role of colleges and universities in the nation’s cities. He cited the stark warning from the University of Pennsylvania’s Ira Harkavy: “[O]ur great universities simply cannot afford to remain islands of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty in seas of squalor, violence, and despair” (*p. 19*). Boyer could not have been more spot-on, as the Brits say, than in his call for targeting education in the early years and the deterioration of our cities, but a cursory assessment of what has been accomplished over the past couple of decades in these two critical areas is enormously disappointing by any measure.

A topic that Boyer did not address in his call for community engagement is the broadening economic inequality in America. It was already abundantly evident but had yet to be identified as a pressing crisis. In the years that have passed since the publication of “The Scholarship of Engagement,” the growing discrepancy between the incomes of the wealthiest and the rest of the population has been highlighted, not by faculty in publicly engaged universities, but by a motley group of protesters camping out in the parks of the nations’ largest cities—the Occupy movement. The slogan “We are the 99%” spread across the country as a hashtag, then became global in scope. Finally, in 2016, the annual meeting of the American Economic Association took aim at wealth inequality and made the theme of the Occupy movement its central concern (Schwartz, 2016). A robust scholarship of engagement would have led the way in identifying and promoting vigorous public discourse on this critical issue underlying so many of the social problems that Boyer did mention.

Decline of the Scholarship of Engagement?

Boyer’s essay on the scholarship of engagement was clearly a source of inspiration across American higher education. This is evident in its inclusion in the 20th anniversary issue of this journal on outreach and engagement. Virtually any time I have been involved with occasions discussing public scholarship, the essay

is cited as celebrating scholarly engagement with social problems in the larger community. The essay is not only an affirmative proclamation, however; it is a lament. As Ernie put it: "The historic commitment to the 'scholarship of engagement' has dramatically declined" (p. 13). Boyer cited extensively from Russell Jacoby's (1987) popular *The Last Intellectuals*, complaining that intellectuals have been largely domesticated by the university, isolated from the public by tenured faculty appointments, encouraged to write in a style understood only by disciplinary peers, and rewarded by a system that in fact discourages public engagement and participation in community-based discourse.

The Emergence of a Different Epistemology

Boyer was right about the decline of the scholarship of engagement when he wrote his essay in 1995. There has emerged since then, however, a new epistemological approach. The debate about a broader definition of scholarship was initiated with the Carnegie report *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990). In that 1990 publication, engaged scholarship was conceptualized as "the scholarship of application." This understanding assumed an earlier epistemology grounded in an established expert model predicated a distance between the university and the external world. The dominant narrative contended that new knowledge based on pure research would be generated in the university and then applied to the problems of the larger community. This hierarchical, linear assumption about the relationship of pure and applied research informed Vannevar Bush's (1945) influential proposal shaping the funding priorities of the National Science Foundation and the lavish defense spending during the Cold War period following World War II. It also influenced tenure and promotion policies on local university campuses, and continues to do so.

My early drafts of what became *Scholarship Reconsidered*, written while I was on the staff of the Carnegie Foundation (1988–1990), used the phrase "the scholarship of practice." Boyer's scholarship of engagement, building on MIT's Donald Schön's (1983) *Reflective Practitioner*, began to move us toward a different approach to knowing. Since then, a genuine movement composed of mostly younger scholars and practitioners has formed a strong network calling for a radically different epistemological view. This shift extends to the wide, interrelated spectrum of roles necessary to support what has come to be called an ecology of learning. This enlarged approach to scholarship calls for a different relationship with students, one that focuses on student learning

and development—actively engaged and experience-based. The approach to research is more community-based, reciprocal, and collaborative. The relationship with peers, both on campus and off, is seen as less hierarchical and more inclusive—requiring the walls of the university to become more permeable and the relationship with colleagues in the learning process to become more collaborative and egalitarian.

A New Day

This growing movement prefers the phrase *democratic engagement* and takes seriously the radically changing academic context in which we live—technologically driven, globally engaged, and in need of a very different financial model. It is a new day. These publicly engaged scholars and practitioners would agree with John Seely Brown (2012): “Meaning emerges as much from context as content. This truly opens a new dimension of meaning creation.” The future of the scholarship of engagement, as I see it, moves toward the democratization of scholarship itself. The reconsideration of scholarship has only begun, and engaged scholarly work will be at the heart of this critical enterprise—the days of the isolated “ivory tower” are over.

References

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About the Author

R. Eugene Rice is Senior Scholar at AAC&U. In 1988-89, Gene was invited to the Carnegie Foundation in Princeton to work on a national study of the scholarly priorities of the American

professoriate. He collaborated with Ernest Boyer on *Scholarship Reconsidered* that provided the context for the article “The Scholarship of Engagement.” Gene’s research and teaching focus on the sociology of the professions and religion. His Ph.D. is from Harvard University. His email is generice10@gmail.com.